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ABSTRACT

Over the past several decades colleges and universities have been experiencing vastly increasing enrollments that have caused institutions to expand programs and facilities to accommodate great numbers of students. Such expansion requires careful planning on the part of higher education administrators and accurate prediction as to the actual numbers and types of students attending their institutions. Such planning and accuracy of prediction has not been the case however, as many institutions have now expanded their programs beyond financial means and student demand. Private colleges and universities are in particular trouble as they strive to compete with the state-supported university's low tuition fees. This paper examines enrollment trends of the recent past up to the present, considers some of the effects of these trends, and how some institutions cope with problems that arise from enrollment fluctuations. (Author)

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ENROLLMENT TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by Helene I. Shell

Over the past several decades colleges and universities have been experiencing vastly increasing enrollments that have caused institutions to expand programs and facilities to accommodate great numbers of students. Such expansion requires careful planning on the part of higher education administrators and accurate prediction as to the actual numbers and types of students attending their institutions.

This paper examines enrollment trends of the recent past up to the present, considers some of the effects of these trends and how some institutions cope with problems that arise from enrollment fluctuations.

TRENDS IN THE 1960's

From 1960 to 1970 higher education enrollments increased 212 percent in public institutions and 38 percent in private institutions[1]. Aside from the sheer numbers that these percentages represent, there are several factors of social and economic importance present. Questions arise as to why so many more students continue their education beyond high school and why increase in enrollments is so much greater in public institutions than in private colleges and universities.

One of the major reasons for such a drastic overall increase in U.S. college and university enrollment is the dramatic increase in numbers of people born during the 1940's, resulting in more college age students during the 1960's. However, enrollment increases cannot be totally attributed to population growth. On the contrary, studies show that whereas 40 percent of all high school graduates continued their educations in college in 1960[2], more than 66 percent of all high school graduates pursued a college education in 1970[3].

There are two primary reasons why so many more students are availing themselves of higher education. The first is purely one of economics. It has been seen in the past that a college graduate commands a better job and thus a higher salary than a high school graduate[7]. Whether this is because college graduates are better informed and better able to perform a job than high school graduates or because of the one-time scarcity of college graduates is not certain[7]. Nevertheless, the monetary reward for a college degree holder has been so great in the past that many students have been encouraged to continue their education.

The other major factor influencing increased enrollments is that of social upward mobility and stability[7]. This is a particularly important factor for persons from low socioeconomic backgrounds, but persons from middle- or upper-middle-class backgrounds are also included. Whereas students from blue collar families strive through education to become white collar workers, those from white collar families feel that they must continue their educations in order to stay on top.

Recently, educational opportunities have been available to more persons than ever before, as a college education has come to be viewed as an inalienable right of the multitudes rather than a privilege of an elite few[8]. Vast sums of government money in the form of scholarships and loans have been made available to blacks and other minorities previously denied access to education in order to bring into reality true equality of educational opportunity. In addition, open enrollment policies adopted at many state institutions have allowed those with poor academic records to continue their education by offering remedial work in the freshman year.

These increased opportunities have led to higher aspirations for students from low-income families. A comparison of similar surveys conducted by the Bureau of the Census in 1959 and 1965 of high school seniors reveals that twice as many students from the lowest classified income bracket (less than $3,000 a year) planned to attend college in 1965 than in 1959[7].

PUBLIC VERSUS PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS

As late as 1951, state supported colleges and universities were enrolling under 50 percent of the college students in the U.S. This percentage had changed to 57.2 percent in 1960 and increased to 75.1 percent in 1970[9]. This shift from private to public education was due to several factors, and the implications for both the private and public higher education sectors are many and diverse.

One of the major benefits to enrolling in a public rather than a private college or university is that of cost. Because state supported institutions receive the majority of their income from state appropriations, tuition and fee costs are considerably lower than at private colleges.

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In Texas, annual per student costs in the public colleges and universities is estimated as being between $1,200 and $1,300 as opposed to the $1,800-and-up per student costs recorded in the private higher education institutions[14]. There are four major reasons cited for the discrepancy in these figures:

(1) The much greater volume of students in the public sector contributes to lower per-student costs.
(2) To help combat and meet rising costs, private sector administrative budgets must include promotion, fund-raising, and student recruitment expenses.
(3) A slightly higher percentage of enrollment in the private sector senior colleges and universities is at the graduate level than in the public senior institutions—15 percent as compared with 13 percent.
(4) Not all funds expended by the public senior institutions for instructional purposes are appropriated by the [Texas] Legislature. (14, pp. 9-10)

As previously stated, open enrollment policies at state colleges and universities have greatly encouraged high school graduates to continue their education. Under most of these policies, any person who graduated from an accredited high school in a state is qualified for admission to a state college or university. The knowledge that he can attend an institution without having to compete for admission, combined with the existence of lower tuition rates, naturally encourages the student to attend the state rather than the private college.

Many students entering postsecondary education during the 1960's used the rapidly expanding state junior college systems as a point of entry into the higher educational process. These institutions, created throughout the states as regional educational units, offered students access to higher education close to their homes at a relatively low cost. A recent study reveals that enrollments in junior colleges have increased from 600,000 in 1960 to more than 2.2 million in 1970, an increase of 266 percent[1]. In addition, it was stated that "junior college students now constitute the majority of all freshmen and sophomores enrolled in higher education"[1].

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION

Private colleges and universities, needless to say, are being highly effected by the enrollment trends of the 1960's. In the past several years many have been forced to close their doors due to dwindling enrollments. Others are trying to cope with the situation. The question has arisen in state legislatures as to state responsibility for private higher education in light of the contributions of private institutions to the well-being of the state.

A survey of private colleges and universities indicates that freshman applications declined 1.5 percent in academic year 1967-68, followed by a decrease of less than one-tenth of a percent in 1968-69, with an increase in applications of 4.6 percent following in 1969-70[15]. For the first 2 years of decline, the institutions tried to compensate for dwindling applications by accepting almost 60 percent of applicants. However, in spite of this effort, freshman headcount enrollment still declined 1.7 percent over the 2 years, and in 1969-70, with an increase in applications of 4.6 percent, an acceptance rate of 60 percent, and an increase of freshman headcount enrollment of 2.5 percent, the overall increase of undergraduate enrollment was still only 0.7 percent[15].

From the standpoint of the institution, this slight increase in enrollment indicates a decrease in funds. With inflation decreasing the value of the dollar, faculty demanding higher wages, and facility maintenance costs rising, increases in tuition are necessary. This, in turn, eliminates a certain number of students who cannot afford to attend private colleges, causing more of a drop in applications and a resultiing drop in enrollments.

Many private colleges are experiencing the problem of empty dormitory rooms and facilities that must be maintained even if they are not used[16]. This is costly to the institutions. At the same time, however, public institutions are becoming overcrowded as they take in additional students[16].

According to one study, from 1,000 to 1,500 students is the minimum enrollment that a liberal arts college can maintain and remain economically solid[6]. On the other hand, if enrollment in an independent college reaches from 2,500 to 5,000 students, the financial base is likely to be shaken as a result of increased needs for facilities, such as laboratories and faculty offices[17].

In a recent study of enrollment patterns in southern institutions (and it is assumed that these statistics hold somewhat true for the rest of the nation), 68 percent of the private liberal arts colleges had enrollments of under 1,000; 100 percent of the private comprehensive colleges were underenrolled; 10 percent of the private doctoral institutions were underenrolled; and 99 percent of the private 2-year institutions were underenrolled[18].

Already all of the students enrolled in higher education institutions in Wyoming are enrolled in state colleges and universities due to the closing of all private institutions. It is predicted that Oregon and Mississippi will soon join Wyoming, and that unless drastic measures are taken, Ohio will soon follow[16].

CONCERN BY THE STATES

After many years of competition with the private higher education sector, the states are beginning to question whether they can afford to allow the independent colleges and universities to disappear. They are considering the contributions that the private institutions make to the state as a whole, and the cost that would be involved to the states should the private institutions close.

In Tennessee it is felt that private institutions, because of their diverse backgrounds and general life styles, allow students a wider choice of the type of education they might pursue than if there were only public institutions for them to choose from. In addition, it is believed that private colleges and universities, because of their relatively small size, allow a better opportunity for close student-faculty relationships and thus more opportunity for personalized education for the students. Further, it is felt that smaller private institutions are more conducive to educational experimentation and innovation than larger public colleges[3].

Another of the benefits of the private colleges as seen by the Tennessee Council of Private Colleges and the Tennessee Higher Education Commission is that of the areas served by the institutions. Many private colleges have been built in the major Tennessee metropolitan areas, but they are also

located in rural areas throughout the state where, very often, no public institution exists to serve the students of the area. The cost to the state would be too great either to duplicate the existing private facilities or to buy out the private college facilities should the private institution go bankrupt. Thus, the state has decided that "the private colleges are an asset far too valuable to be ignored in long-range planning for higher education in Tennessee"[3].

Other states are also reconsidering the value of private higher education and taking steps to alleviate the burdens the private institutions are experiencing. This year in New York an announcement was made that the public and private colleges and universities intend "to open together an era of mutual support and cooperation"[14]. This announcement was based on an agreement between the sectors that students should be allowed to have a choice between public and private higher education and that there was a need to alleviate the problems of empty classrooms in the private colleges on the one hand and overcrowding in the public facilities on the other[14].

In Massachusetts a statement by representatives of the public and private sectors was recently made that indicated cooperation among the public and private higher education institutions will take the place of conflict in the years to come. It was decided that an "equal opportunity pool" should be created to guarantee admission to both the private and public institutions to all state residents. In addition, the pool will be used to aid financially disadvantaged students in the state. It has also been suggested that a forum be set up to settle disputes that might arise over the creation of new programs in either the private or public sector[14].

PRIVATE COLLEGES TAKE ACTION

Although the future of their institutions may look rather bleak at times, many small private college administrators are taking positive steps that hopefully will pull them out of the enrollment and financial bind they find themselves in. A 1971 report of the Carnegie Commission[12] makes several recommendations that some of the private institutions are following in an attempt to survive. One such recommendation involved the strengthening of programs to increase enrollments at these institutions.

Administrators at Meredith College in Raleigh, North Carolina, decided that in light of the fact that the enrollment at Meredith (845 students) fell short of the recommended minimum of 1,000 students for a liberal arts college, a comprehensive development plan should take place that would increase enrollments. It was determined that faculty and facilities already in existence at the college were almost sufficient to handle 300 to 350 more students than before. Thus, a new library building, several new dormitories, and a physical education building were constructed, and an all-out student recruiting program was begun. Enrollment increased to 1,206 in 1971-72 and 1,259 in 1972-73. Only a slight increase in tuition was necessary to raise faculty and staff salaries sufficiently. Meredith thus was in a better condition to face the future[15].

Another recommendation of the Carnegie Commission report was that private colleges enter into cooperative arrangements with other colleges in order to expand the educational opportunities available and thus increase the attractiveness of each of the colleges for potential students. Stratford and Averett Colleges in Danville, Virginia, two private institutions enrolling approximately 500 to 800 students, respectively, have determined to join into such a cooperative agreement. Under the plan as drawn up, the academic curricula of the two schools will be combined, and a student may take any course or courses that he or she might desire regardless of which campus the course is taught on or by whom. In addition, all of the facilities of the two colleges will be mutually shared[15].

Such an arrangement as this is not only beneficial in terms of attracting more students, but the economic advantages are great as well. In a shared services and facilities arrangement costly duplication of faculties and programs can be avoided while at the same time more areas of study are opened to students.

PRESENT TRENDS AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

Since 1970, enrollment growth has been declining in both private and public colleges and universities at a rate unprecedented since World War II[13]. A survey of 2,417 colleges and universities across the U.S. in Fall 1971 indicates that enrollments were up only 4.1 percent[13] as compared with an approximately 7 percent increase in 1970[2]. This drop in the rate of increase was followed by a mere 2 percent increase in higher education enrollments for academic year 1972-73.

As previously indicated, the slowdown is greater at private institutions than at public colleges and universities. Whereas the precentage of enrollment increase was only 2 percent overall in 4-year institutions in Fall 1972, the member institutions of the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC) reported an enrollment increase of 5.7 percent[5].

However, even at the NASULGC institutions, a decline in the actual number of applications has occurred for Fall 1973. Applications at these institutions numbered only 550,047 for academic year 1973-74 as compared to 573,026 for 1972-73, a rate of decline of 4.01 percent. Despite the drop in applications at these institutions, enrollments are still expected to climb by 1.27 percent. Such an increase is accounted for by a decrease in the number of students rejected.

As in the time of drastic increase in the number of students, the present slowdown in enrollments can be attributed primarily to financial and social conditions. Many potential students are finding that instead of pursuing a college education, due to personal financial needs, they must start working to support themselves or enroll in short-term job training programs that will enable them to attain financial security in a short period of time[13]. Other students find that money for student financial aid is tighter and therefore believe that they are not financially able to enter college[6]. Still others have become disillusioned with the middle-class values that appear to be propagated by the higher education system, and thus have dropped out to search for modes of life other than those purported to be ideal by our society. This may or may not be a temporary trend, and those students who are discontinuing their educations at the present time may well decide to reenter the higher education system at a later time[6]. Whatever the reasons, the implications for the future of higher education as it is now are many.

Several of the NASULGC institutions have found the application slowdown to be a help rather than a hindrance. At one university where applications decreased 41.24 percent

for Fall 1973, it was reported that the decline was expected and that the resulting decreases in enrollment, predicted to be 9.5 percent, would enable a more satisfactory student-faculty ratio to be achieved. Other institutions were pleased that they have to reject fewer qualified applicants than in the past. Still others felt that late applications would reduce the percentage of decline considerably[4].

Elsewhere, however, concern over dwindling enrollment remains high in anticipation of further declines in the future. Such declines appear to be a certainty when one considers that between 1960 and 1970 there was a decrease of 15 percent of children under 5 years old, and since then a birthrate of zero population growth[5]. The effects on the institutions as a whole will be visible due to such a drastic decline in students. According to one source:

> The effect on the demand for faculty will be dramatic. As the rate of growth in enrollment declines, the need for additions to faculty will also taper off. Turnover of faculty members will undoubtedly decline as new hiring falls off, and in the 1980's additional faculty members will be needed only to replace those who retire or who die before retirement. (11, p. 111).

In addition, financial losses due to cutbacks in enrollment and loss of tuition fees will put more of a burden on the state and federal governments. Educational facilities needed, built, and used during a period of enrollment growth will become underutilized because of a lack of students. Moreover, programs at colleges and universities will become less flexible and innovative because of a slow or stagnant rate of turnover among faculty.

Lyman A. Glenny of the Center for Research and Development in Higher Education at the University of California, Berkeley, feels that many colleges and universities will be unable to survive unless they "respond creatively" to the social, political, and economic trends of the present[6]. He feels that administrators and faculties cannot look on present trends as being temporary, and advises that realistic policies and programs be developed with these trends in mind. Glenny numbers the following trends as being of utmost importance for planning the future of higher education[7]:

(1) the decline in the birthrate between 1960 and 1970 that will account for fewer college age students in the future;

(2) a possible "funding plateau" for higher education as state and federal governments increasingly recognize and expand funding to other social priorities such as health care and ecology;

(3) the increase in the numbers and percentage of students in pursuing a vocational education program rather than liberal arts training;

(4) the need for master planning of higher education at the state level, a means now required before institutions can receive federal aid; and

(5) the trend dictating that students of the future will be paying a greater percentage of their educational costs, either directly or out of future earnings, a trend that may or may not dissuade students from entering college.

Thus, planning is the key word in looking into the future of higher education. Administrators must look at the trends not only in terms of numbers of students to be served, but in types of students to be served as well. For if the right kind of postsecondary education is not offered, students will be less inclined to spend the time or money necessary to earn a degree.

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